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The implementation of NVQs in the Sultanate of Oman

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Abstract

The Sultanate of Oman is the only country in the world, other than the UK, to have adopted the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) as its national system for vocational training. The study aims to assess the extent to which centres in Oman have been successful in implementing the NVQ, and the extent to which the NVQ has contributed towards achievement of the Omani government's objective of omanisation (replacing expatriate labour with Omani nationals). Discusses feedback from centres, which should be of interest to the Omani government, the British awarding bodies and others with an interest in the implementation of competence-based training. Concludes that the NVQ has been fairly successful in Oman, although it is recognised that local culture and context have not been adequately considered and catered for, and that the generally low competence of candidates in English is hindering their learning and skills development.

Keywords

NVQs, Vocational training, Sultanate of Oman, Omanisation

Introduction

The Sultanate of Oman is a country of some 300,000sq. km. which occupies the south-eastern corner of the Arabian peninsula. It shares borders with Saudi Arabia to the west, the United Arab Emirates to the north-west and Yemen to the south-west. To the east of the country lies the Arabian Sea and to the north-east the Gulf of Oman. Oman's first national census in 1973 found the country's population to be 2,018,074 of which 73.5 per cent were Omanis and the remainder expatriates. In the capital area, expatriates accounted for 46 per cent of the population. Some 52 per cent of the total population was aged 15 or under. It is estimated that the total population is now over 2.3 million and that the birth rate is around 3.5 per cent. The census found that while illiteracy among older Omanis was high, among the young it had fallen to 4.5 per cent for males and 21 per cent for females. Some 86 per cent of children aged 6-11 were attending primary school. The next census is expected to take place in 2003.

Development plans

Oman has planned its development through the creation of a series of five-year development plans, the first of which was for the period 1976-1980 (Al-

Dhahab, 1997). The first plan aimed to expand and diversify the economy and ensure that the necessary infrastructure was established. Omanisation, the replacement in the labour force of expatriates with Omanis, became a main objective of the later plans. Oman, like all of the other Arab Gulf States, has relied heavily on expatriate labour to ensure its rapid growth and development. However, the slower rates of economic growth in recent years along with a high birth rate and increasing youth unemployment has encouraged the government to develop a range of strategies to achieve omanisation.

The Development Council, responsible for development plans prior to 1996, recognised the need for human resource development if the government's objectives for omanisation were to be achieved. The establishment of a strong vocational education and training sector was seen as an important element in the country's development strategy which would help accelerate economic growth, provide industry with labour possessing skills that were in short supply, reduce youth unemployment, instil technical knowledge, provide an option for less academically able students, reduce poverty among low income groups and ensure that the country is able to benefit from economic globalisation. It should be noted, however, that these commonly believed benefits of vocational education and training have been challenged (Psacharopoulos, 1997).

Vocational training policy

A royal decree established the Vocational Training Authority (VTA) in 1991 in support of the country's fourth Five-Year Development Plan (1991-95) which aimed to achieve further significant human resource development in the Sultanate. The VTA established a system of Technical Industrial Colleges, which offered the British General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ), and Vocational Training Centres, which were intended to supply the labour market with semi-skilled and skilled workers and which now offer the Omani Vocational Qualification (OVQ). It was an objective of the VTA that the responsibility for vocational training would be shared between the public sector and the private sector institutes and training organisations (Al-Dhahab, 1997). In 1996, private training organisations were given permission to offer the British National Vocational Qualification (NVQ).

In December 1997, the VTA was abolished and its responsibility for vocational training was transferred to the Ministry of Social Affairs, Labour and Vocational Training. For the 1998/99 academic year, RO9 million (approximately \$23.5 million) was allocated as the operating budget for the Technical Industrial Colleges and Vocational Training Centres. In addition, the government set aside around RO6 million to train Omanis in private sector institutes. The NVQ was made the only qualification that would attract government funding for training taking place in the private sector.

The UK's Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) became the official partner of the Ministry of Social Affairs, Labour and Vocational Training to oversee implementation of the NVQ and the establishment and maintenance of quality assurance systems. It was intended that the Ministry would

eventually set up its own Training and Quality Control Department. Two British awarding bodies, OCR (formerly RSA) and Edexcel BTEC maintain regional offices in Oman but other awarding bodies, such as City and Guilds, are also active in the Sultanate. In early 2000, when QCA's contract with the Ministry came to the end of its life, British Training International (BTI) became the official UK partner of the Ministry. BTI was established by the British government in 1997 with the aim of establishing the UK as the recognised world leader in providing vocational education, training and related services. In November 2000 BTI merged with the British Council, and since then BTI has become the vocational education and training promotions team within the British Council (BTI, 2000). This division of the British Council continues to offer advice and support to the Omani Ministry on various aspects of vocational education and training.

National Vocational Qualification (NVQ)

Oman is the only country in the world, other than the UK, to have wholly adopted the British competence-based training model represented by the NVQ as their national system for vocational training (British Council, 2000). The NVQ was introduced in the UK in 1986. A NVQ represents a statement of competence confirming that an individual can perform to a specified standard at one of five levels in a range of work-related activities, and has the related skills, knowledge and understanding that makes that performance possible in a work setting (Harrison, 1997). The NVQ is competence-based, work-based and job specific.

NVQs are awarded by various examining boards, such as OCR and Edexcel BTEC, but their content, or rather their standards, to use the official terminology, were originally determined by industry lead bodies. These consisted mainly of employers and professionals from the relevant industries. The NVQ has five levels, which relate to the responsibilities and autonomy of a particular job role. For example, level 1 requires competence in mainly routine and predictable activities, while level 5 requires substantial personal accountability, autonomy, management of other managers, allocation of resources, analysis, diagnosis, planning and evaluation (BTEC, 1998).

The assessments for NVQs are usually conducted in the workplace by qualified assessors. Assessors are required to hold the D32/D33 assessor awards. The competence of candidates is usually assessed through observation, but this is supplemented with oral questioning and a variety of other tests in order to confirm that candidates have also satisfied the knowledge and understanding requirements. Qualified internal verifiers (holding the D34 award) who are usually employed in the same organisation as the assessors ensure that assessors are judging candidates against the standards fairly, accurately and sufficiently. The awarding bodies appoint external verifiers to ensure quality and consistency across centres.

The NVQ advocates a particular style of learning and assessment, which has affected both the way trainers deliver learning and the ways candidates prepare themselves for assessment. Wolf (1998) argues that, given the views of the NVQ's creators, the portfolio as an assessment technique was

inevitable. A portfolio is a folder in which candidates collect paper-based evidence of their competence for every part of the standards. Candidates must be highly motivated and possess good administrative skills to produce a successful portfolio, as it is a fairly complicated and time-consuming process.

A UK government White Paper in 1994 (HMSO, 1994) stated that as a national target 50 per cent of young people in Britain should achieve NVQ level 3 or its equivalent by the year 2000. In January 1996, the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) claimed that over three million people were working towards achievement of an NVQ. If this was true, it is curious that by June 2001 a total of only 3,350,055 NVQ certificates had been awarded (QCA, 2001). There are, however, several factors that should be considered when looking at the official statistics of NVQ completions. Firstly, only whole NVQs are accounted for, but many candidates aim to achieve only a number of units rather than whole awards. For example, NVQ assessors usually only take the D32 and D33 units from the Training and Development NVQs. Secondly, there is no set time limit for achievement of NVQs and this may encourage candidates to take several years to complete their awards, and thirdly, the time lag between candidates completing their award and the issuing of certificates can sometimes be quite considerable due to the verification and administrative procedures required.

There are many possible advantages and benefits associated with the NVQ, but also possible problems and weaknesses (Field, 1999; Smithers, 1999; Wilkins, 2001b). The NVQ was intended to help solve the skills shortage among the UK workforce and to create a framework for vocational qualifications which would eliminate the majority of the large number of existing vocational qualifications. The NVQ's creators believed that the NVQ was practical and employment-led because the standards were created by employer representatives and both training and assessment took place largely in the workplace. However, it was the government's funding of training for the unemployed that created by far the largest market for NVQs. Smithers (1999) argues that since NVQs have no coherent statement of content, they are virtually useless as qualifications for 14-19 year olds, or even for adults preparing for work. This view was further supported by Beaumont's review of NVQs (Beaumont, 1996) as he concluded that the fact that NVQs are work-based prevents those not in work from obtaining the qualification.

The NVQ has further been criticised as being too narrow in focus, too time consuming, expensive and bureaucratic to implement and fundamentally for not satisfying the demands and requirements of industry. As the majority of awards achieved are at the lowest levels and in service sector occupations they do not contribute significantly to reducing the skills shortages in manufacturing and higher technician occupations. For example, while the vocational qualifications systems of France and Germany do not have a low skills level that corresponds to NVQ level 1 some 18 per cent of NVQs achieved in the UK have been at level 1 and 59 per cent at level 2 (QCA, 2001).

Aims of study

The study aimed to gain feedback from NVQ centres in Oman on:

- Why they chose to offer the NVQ
- How successful they feel they have been as a centre in offering the NVQ
- The reasons why candidates fail to achieve the NVQ
- The extent to which the NVQ has helped the government's policy of omanisation
- The advantages and disadvantages of adopting the NVQ in Oman
- The extent to which the national language, culture, politics or economy has affected the implementation of the NVQ

It is intended that the results of the study will be of interest and use to the Omani government to aid their further development of competence-based training in the Sultanate, to neighbouring Gulf States who do not yet use competence-based training as a national system and to the relevant British organisations (such as QCA, the British Council and the awarding bodies) to provide important feedback about the experiences and beliefs of practitioners and managers implementing the NVQ in Oman. Practitioners and researchers who are interested in assessing the extent to which a western educational system can be successfully transferred to a developing country may be particularly interested in the results, and they may provide a foundation for further research.

Method

The centre manager or NVQ programme manager at 14 NVQ centres in the Sultanate of Oman agreed to participate in the study. As the Omani Ministry of Social Affairs, Labour and Vocational Training has licensed around 25 training institutes to offer the NVQ, this sample represents over half of all NVQ centres operating in the Sultanate (British Council, 2000). Each respondent returned by fax or mail a questionnaire which consisted of 16 mainly open questions designed to get basic facts about their centre, its staff and candidates, their experiences of delivering and assessing NVQs and their personal views on a variety of issues. These included their assessment of their centre's success in implementing the NVQ, their view on the extent to which the NVQ has helped develop Omani nationals to support the government's omanisation policy, the advantages and disadvantages of using the NVQ in Oman, and the extent to which national language, culture, politics and economy affect implementation of the NVQ in Oman.

Respondents

Of the 14 centres that participated in the study, five were colleges or educational institutes, eight were training organisations and one was a company training centre. Although one centre offered NVQs as early as 1994, the others all started during or after 1996, the year in which the Ministry of Social Affairs, Labour and Vocational Training (MOSALVT) made the NVQ the only qualification for vocational training which would attract government funding. The mean number of NVQs awarded during the last 12 months by each of the fourteen centres was 131. One new centre which had not yet had any completions was ignored. It can be seen, therefore, that most centres do not have a very high number of candidates, although three of the centres have

had over 1000 completions to date, and one is awarding over 500 NVQs a year. Some 71 per cent of centres expect their provision of NVQs to increase in 2002, 14 per cent expect it to stay about the same and only one centre expects it to decrease (a small centre which offers only the vocational assessor and verifier awards to its employees).

Five centres employ five or fewer full time staff (or full time equivalents) as assessors, internal verifiers or programme leaders for their NVQs, four employ between 6-10, three employ between 11-15 and two employ over 15. Most of these staff are of British origin, who came to Oman with experience of working with NVQs in the UK and who hold the necessary assessor/verifier qualifications. The UK awarding bodies require all NVQ assessors and verifiers to have job specific occupational experience usually gained within the preceding five years and to hold the relevant assessor (D32/D33) and/or internal verifier (D34) awards. In addition, the Omani government expects all NVQ assessors and verifiers to hold a bachelor's degree and to have had five years teaching experience. These are not requirements in the UK and it has made recruitment of staff in some subject areas difficult. As one respondent commented, "How many retail professionals do you know who have a degree, five years teaching experience, experience in the retail industry during the last five years and who hold the assessor/verifier awards?"

Most of the NVQs offered in Oman are at level 2, which are targeted at young unemployed people. The most popular subjects are accounting, administration and information technology. More than half of the centres that participated in the study offered these subjects. Five centres offered production or maintenance engineering, welding or fabrication. Other subjects offered include carpentry and wood occupations, customer service, retail operations, sales, travel/tourism/hospitality services and vehicle maintenance. Some 36 per cent of centres offer NVQs at level 3 in addition to level 2, but only one centre offers level 4 awards.

Candidates

The majority of NVQ candidates in Oman are government funded. The government sponsorship criteria are that candidates must be Omani nationals, they should usually have graduated from school and they should not have officially held a job. Until recently, it was the responsibility of the training organisation to find a sponsoring company for each candidate to provide both workplace training and employment after completion of their training. A proportion of the training organisations' funding was dependent upon candidates being in employment six months after achieving their NVQ. Keeping track of candidates who changed jobs after completing their training was a difficult task for centres and many believed they were deprived of income which they should have received.

Because of the government's funding regulations virtually all NVQ candidates are Omani nationals. Only in the centre that offers the vocational assessor and verifier awards do expatriates account for 90 per cent of registrations. Most of the candidates are aged between 18-21, although there are many candidates also aged between 22-29, especially for the level 3 awards. Some

64 per cent of centres have a heavy gender bias among candidates ranging from 90 per cent female to 100 per cent male. Such gender bias is usually determined by the occupational specialisms of the centre. Females, for example, are not found in centres specialising in occupations such as carpentry, engineering and vehicle maintenance. Omani schools educate males and females separately and this continues in much of post-school education and training. Males and females are segregated in many aspects of day-to-day life in Oman.

Some 71 per cent of centres reported achieving completion rates above 90 per cent, 14 per cent reported achieving over 80 per cent completions, while two centres did not give information on their completions. These figures are significantly better than what is achieved by centres in the UK. Despite the problems that candidates in Oman often have, such as low competence in English and a lack of support from their family, most do persevere with their training until they eventually achieve the NVQ. Many candidates do fail, however, often because they have a poor attitude and a lack of interest and commitment. These candidates either drop out from their programme of training or they stay but are unreliable, perhaps with poor attendance, and therefore fail to pass the required assessments. Others leave because they find a better job while in training. It is recognised that many candidates find it difficult to adapt to, or cope in, the workplace. Most have not worked before and employees, many of whom are likely to be expatriates, are often reluctant to give trainees the necessary and appropriate help and support. Some employees are frustrated by the poor knowledge and skill base of candidates or by their lack of motivation and reliability while others see young Omani trainees as a threat to their own job security. As many expatriate workers are, in fact, replaced by Omanis it is understandable why they are often unwilling to co-operate with the training of nationals.

Implementation of the NVQ in Oman

Most of the centres offering the NVQ in Oman are doing so because they were encouraged to do so by the government and/or because they recognised that competence-based training linked to the NVQ would be a growing and profitable market. Private training organisations wishing to receive government funding for vocational training have no choice but to offer the NVQ as, since 1996, it has been the only qualification for vocational training which attracts government funding. Many found comfort in the knowledge that the government had adopted a training system which was already established, and some would say proven, in the UK.

All of the respondents believe that their own centre is successful in implementing the NVQ (79 per cent “very successful” and 21 per cent “moderately successful”). Most respondents emphasised that their centre maintains strict quality control to awarding body criteria and several mentioned that they had achieved excellent external verification reports, while others mentioned that their success can be measured by their low drop-out, high completion and high employment rates. Some centres mentioned that they have only recruited qualified and experienced staff from the UK. These staff have designed and delivered effective competence-based programmes

and they have been supported with the provision of good physical and learning resources. Most programme managers believe that their senior management and/or centre owners are committed to providing quality NVQ programmes even though the commitment of the Omani government to the qualification in the longer-term is unclear. On the negative side, some centres mentioned the difficulty experienced by them in attempting to secure training and employment opportunities for candidates and the fact that many successful candidates do not secure suitable employment on completion of their training.

Some 36 per cent of respondents thought that the NVQ had been “very successful” in developing Omani nationals, 64 per cent thought “moderately successful” and none thought “unsuccessful”. As one respondent summed up, “It’s better than what we had before.” On the positive side, respondents believed that the combination of work and study was effective, that candidates *have* developed the knowledge and skills needed for employment and that they are productive in the workplace. On the negative side, however, many respondents recognised that their trainees do not meet the (perhaps unrealistic) expectations of employers, that awareness about the NVQ is still limited among both employers and the general public, that the NVQ is predominantly an assessment rather than a training system, that candidates spend too much time trying to understand the NVQ methodology, that the focus on developing portfolios hinders learning and the development of skills, and because competence in English is generally low among candidates, too much time and effort are spent on developing language when this time and effort could be spent on developing vocational skills. Many candidates start their training with a poor attitude and they lack interest and commitment, and with their low ability in English and the NVQ methodology which in their view requires too much effort to understand, they are easily tempted to drop out from their programme.

Influences of language, culture, politics and economy

NVQs are only being offered in Oman because this is what the Omani government wanted. The NVQ was adopted as the means by which the political and economic objectives of omanisation might be achieved. The centres offering the NVQ do so because they are forced to or because they want or need the income generated, and not because they think it is the most suitable qualification for the Sultanate. Some centres find the NVQ’s assessment structure with its three levels (assessor, internal verifier and external verifier) too bureaucratic and also too expensive to operate. As a result, they cannot cater for very large numbers of trainees.

The Omani economy, like those of the other Arab Gulf States, relies heavily on experienced, but low-paid, expatriate workers. Companies do not really want to replace expatriates with more expensive and less experienced Omani labour. They do not, therefore, willingly provide in any great number training or work placements for young Omani trainees. In some specific trades the government has actually had to ban the employment of expatriates in order to ensure the employment of nationals.

Candidates often take the NVQ to improve their standard of living, e.g. to own and run a car or to contribute to the family income (when they have completed their training), but they generally consider many of the tasks at level 2 too menial. For example, requirements like “maintain a clean and hygienic workplace” are found in many NVQs. Many trainees are ashamed that they have to clean and sweep and they never admit to their families that they do. Many Omanis only want administrative or office jobs. Most jobs are considered gender specific; society dictates whether a particular job is done by either males or females. Females are educated in separate schools from males and they have traditionally stayed at home rather than work. There are many cultural constraints limiting the employment possibilities of young females. For example, many families are not willing to let girls work for retail companies if they would be required to work in the evenings or at weekends. Others are even reluctant for girls to undertake training if they will be taught with boys or if they will be taught and assessed by male staff.

The Omani national culture is similar to that of the other Arabian Gulf countries (Wilkins, 2001a) whereby individuals value both authority and personal relationships, and often base their decisions on intuition and religious beliefs. The family is the strongest social unit and the recruitment of managers is often based on kinship relationships and tribal ties rather than on experience, ability or qualifications. Nevertheless, education is generally admired and respected, and academic qualifications, as in the UK, are always viewed more favourably than vocational qualifications such as the NVQ.

The greatest barrier to learning and understanding for most Omanis is their weak ability to comprehend and communicate in English. Centres generally feel that they spend too much time improving language ability rather than vocational skills. In the interior region, far from the capital, work is usually performed by candidates in Arabic and English may not be known at all. As the majority of external verifiers cannot speak, read or write fluently in Arabic, it is not possible for NVQs to be delivered and assessed in Arabic, and therefore the NVQ cannot be used at all in such locations.

Wilkins (2001d) observed that UK qualifications are often exported ‘off-the-shelf’ with little or no modification done to reflect the political, economic, social and cultural differences in the different countries in which they are offered. The very nature of NVQs has made their modification difficult to achieve. The NVQ standards were written for a western work environment and they cannot take into account the Omani culture and context. Males and females in Oman are segregated in many aspects of day-to-day life, the concept of equal opportunities is not one that is widely recognised in the Arab Gulf States, and the standards of mandatory units often require candidates to be familiar with things like UK health and safety legislation or the procedure for calculating VAT (Value Added Tax) when they are clearly of no relevance to Omanis. Nevertheless, some respondents made it clear that they believed the NVQ could be successfully implemented in any society regardless of culture, politics or economy if programme delivery and assessment were well planned and executed by dedicated professionals having the necessary resources.

NVQs - the right choice?

NVQ based training has undoubtedly contributed to the reduction of youth unemployment yet there are still over 100,000 young Omanis with basic qualifications unemployed. The NVQ has provided an alternative for young people not getting into college and given them an exposure to the real work environment, which they may not otherwise have gained. The contracts between candidates and employers made through MOSALVT ensure that candidates are kept on by the companies after they complete their training. The NVQ has helped change the attitude of many young Omanis who are not brought up to possess a work ethic as recognised in the west.

All centres claim to be applying the 'national' standards and meeting awarding body criteria. They have made no changes in assessment or management of the NVQs nor found any necessary although several do some of their delivery in Arabic. The NVQ system allows candidates to develop and complete their training at different speeds.

The NVQ system, with its three tiers of assessment, is expensive to implement and this has kept trainee volumes relatively low; also, total training hours are generally much higher in Oman than in the UK and this has resulted in higher operating costs for Omani centres. Many employers are still unfamiliar with the NVQ and so is Omani society in general. Employers are generally not impressed by the level of skills and ability of trainees. Many centre staff, candidates and employers believe that the NVQ's methodology should have been modified for Oman as too much time is spent by candidates trying to understand the NVQ system and too much emphasis is placed on developing language and building a portfolio rather than on developing skills and learning. As in the UK, both candidates and centres complain about the large amounts of administration and paperwork required. The NVQ does not take into account the cultural and contextual differences encountered in Oman, hence making some units or parts of their range irrelevant in the country.

Many candidates come with a poor knowledge base and remain lowly motivated and unreliable, which presents a problem for both centres and the employers providing the work-based training. The fact that expatriate workers are generally seen by employers as being more skilled, reliable, hardworking and cheaper than Omani labour presents a major problem for the government. Furthermore, in the workplace many expatriates are reluctant to co-operate with the training of nationals. Several respondents thought that the Omani government should have developed a wider understanding of the NVQ before choosing to implement it as some of the policies and regulations introduced do not fit with the ethos of NVQs.

Virtually all respondents were in favour of retaining the NVQ. While some said that there was a need to further improve training and learning, no one said there was a need to change the qualification. It should be noted, however, that respondents might have a personal interest in the retention of the NVQ; if the NVQ were replaced by a local qualification, perhaps delivered and assessed in Arabic, they might no longer have a job. Even so, many of the respondents

were clearly genuine fans of the NVQ. Some argued for greater flexibility to revise standards to take account of Omani culture and context, to simplify the assessment process and to deliver and assess in Arabic, as is the case with the OVQs delivered by the government's Vocational Training Centres. While some believed that the OVQ could eventually replace the NVQ, which would offer greater flexibility and be cheaper than linking with UK awarding bodies, there were concerns about quality and international recognition.

There is a need for the government to continue educating both employers and the general public about the objectives and benefits of competence-based vocational training. The government also needs to persuade more nationals to move into the technical fields and to break down the gender stereotyping of individual occupations. Some centres called for the government to provide funding for the higher level awards, i.e. NVQ levels 3 and 4, to allow the progression and development of candidates. The possibility of progression may alone greatly improve the motivation of trainees if they can see that they are not destined to be stuck in 'dead end' jobs.

Conclusion

A survey conducted by MORI in 1999 (THES, 1999) involving hundreds of people in 13 countries found that the reputation of British institutions, courses and qualifications came second only to the United States. A study by Wilkins (2001c) also found high levels of student and employer satisfaction with British education delivered in the Sultanate of Oman and United Arab Emirates. The majority of arguments in favour of or against the implementation of the NVQ in the UK also apply equally well in Oman.

There is still no unanimous agreement on whether or not the NVQ competence-based approach to training really is suitable for unemployed young people. While the Omani government may claim that implementation of the NVQ has helped to reduce youth unemployment and the national skills shortage, many employers still believe that the skills levels of trainees are too low. Other employers, however, believe that adoption of the NVQ system was a step in the right direction as it helped reinforce a national policy for vocational training and it created a national qualifications framework. Nevertheless, it is a problem in Oman, as in the UK, that a high proportion of candidates want to work only in the service sector and therefore the industries with the highest skills shortages, such as manufacturing and engineering, may not be the ones most benefiting from the NVQ training programmes, and as the majority of candidates achieve a level 2 award, they still have only low level skills and knowledge.

By international standards, the NVQ is relatively narrow focused but now an integral part of all Foundation Modern Apprenticeships in the UK are key skills and technical certificates which contain background knowledge and theory. It may reasonably be argued, therefore, that the Omani offering provides a rather more narrow and limited training experience which may not be ideal for unemployed 16-21 year olds.

Implementing a western-based education system in a developing country without any significant modification was never going to be easy or straightforward, but yet the NVQ does seem to be relatively successful in Oman. There is, however, a need for the Omani government to review some of its policies and regulations, there is a need for UK awarding bodies to allow greater flexibility so that delivery can be done in Arabic and so that UK-specific content in the standards can be ignored or modified, and there is a need for centres to develop new strategies which will improve the learning and skills of trainees in a more cost-effective manner. With countries such as Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia also being interested in the competence-based approach to vocational training there have already been discussions about the possibility of establishing a Gulf-wide approach to vocational qualifications. With labour mobility being relatively high among the Gulf States and with them all sharing the same language (Arabic) there may be much sense in this approach although it is unlikely to materialise within the next ten years.

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